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Indelible

Jonathan Wyatt

Abstract

Many years ago I grew away from the evangelical Christian faith that had grounded my life (before and beyond death) since my early teens. Or so I thought: the stories my body now tell confront me with the sense that I have – secretly, ambivalently – held on to elements of that faith. Over recent times, through and since my doctoral studies, I have embraced poststructural and Deleuzian sensibilities. These, one might think, run right up against the entrenched binaries and certainties that remain indelibly inscribed. The narrative of progress and development I have been telling myself over the decades – that I have not just grown away but grown up – is no longer tenable. This paper I examine my doubt at whether I doubt. Amongst the most disturbing stories is one of being beaten in God's name. Its scars remain. I revisit this story in an attempt to dwell more fully in the pain (and pleasure?) of cane on flesh. How am I to (at)tend (to) those scars? What are their meanings? I draw from the psychodynamic and poststructural theoretical frameworks that seem to have failed me, in inquiring into the political, cultural, emotional, psychological and spiritual processes at play in this current disturbance.

Key words: faith, body, knowledge, Deleuze

Indelible

Saturday, Christmas Eve, 2011, Abingdon

As the sun weakens, I run beside the Thames towards the mediaeval heart of the town. I reach St. Helen's Church, whose tolling bells I have heard since the turn onto the river bank. Children emerging from the church's open oak doors cup red-ribboned Christingles¹ in unsteady hands. I can imagine the story the vicar would have told of the Christingle's symbolism, the well-rehearsed evangelical message.

Following East St Helen's Street to the right, a hundred strides later I reach St Nicolas' Church, whose bells also call, before heading towards the Abbey Meadows and back to the river.

This morning, as I lay in bed, drifting in and out of light sleep, I heard carols on the radio, sung a-cappella. One of them was the cloying Silent Night. It engages my sentimentality about childhood rather than my former faith.

I shall not attend church at midnight, nor tomorrow morning, and I shall feel neither sadness nor guilt.

Last year, in early December, before the end of the university term, we went to the carol service, my first for a decade, at Magdalen College. We were in the cheap seats, the benches at the back, able to glimpse the choristers and readers only between uneven heads and the wooden struts of the screen. The singing was perfection, the atmosphere – of ancient, Church of England Christmas tradition – all one could have wished for. But I was bored. I dreamed instead of the darkened basement of Chicago's Rosa's Lounge and the guts of Pete Galanis' rolling blues; and the Christmas bells of Shane McGowan's old soaks².

My regular Sunday morning routines now involve a different pattern to the one I followed during the ten years I would have described myself as a born-again Christian. One such recent Sunday, much like any others, October 2nd, Tessa dropped me outside my gym in Oxford. It should have been autumn but the sun hit the glinting tarmac like a rare, perfect mid-summer's day. As I eased out of the car, I heard the full-hearted singing of evangelical St Ebbes on the other side of the squat stone wall beside me. I didn't recognise the hymn, but it was modern, after my time. We kissed goodbye and I watched her turn our old navy Vauxhall into Pembroke St towards her gym half a mile back out of the city.

My exercise that morning took me past the small Victorian terraces along Oxford's stretch of the Thames, six miles further north from Abingdon and home, and into Hinksey

park, where the ill-kept tennis courts were busy with keen players in whites and where middle-aged men sailed remote-controlled naval boats on the pond. After cutting left onto the Abingdon Road, I followed the path back into the city along a different branch of the river bank and its series of moored barges. My running was hesitant, my ankle still sore after twisting it in May. Healing takes so very long now.

After working out, showered and alive with post-activity endorphins, and on my way to meet Tessa for coffee, I passed St Ebbes again as its congregation gathered after the service; and I was reacquainted with my relief that Sunday's stultifying churchgoing pattern was no longer my life.

It is more than relief. A sense of liberation remains even after thirty years. There is the joy of a freedom to explore, the continuing thrill of working with new theory, new ideas, fresh ways of seeing the world; ways that seemed, and continue to seem, incompatible with my former evangelical world view. Just two days ago, Ken Gale and I submitted a new essay that works with the Deleuzoguattarian figure of 'assemblage' ([e.g. Deleuze & Guattari, 2004](#)). We have, of course, no idea yet of what the reviewers will make of our writing, but our excitement, even after six years of working with Deleuze, remains. As I type now, my fingers are unable to keep pace with the exhilaration I feel when I consider the implications of Deleuze for living. When St. Pierre writes of reading him, I feel the rush in my heart and lungs:

"It was not simply that I 'had multiple subjectivities' or 'moved among subject positions' but that I was always already a simultaneity of relations with humans and the nonhuman (I could no longer think/live that dichotomy)--the 'women' [in her research study] and 'me' in all times and places; my father, long dead, loving me; the streets and storefronts of the town; all us cousins catching lightning bugs on a summer evening; Essex County's red clay tobacco fields; my beloved aunt whose smile saved everyone who met her; all of us, everything, de-individualized, de-identified, *dis-individuated*. A rhizome, assemblage, haecceity, my life. *A life*. Theory produced me differently, and I am not the same. I never was." (St. Pierre, 2011, p. 622, italics in the original)

Nor me: I, too, am not the same, nor ever was. Deleuze sliced me open with de-individualising notions of the subject, re-arranging me into forces and flows, lines not points; a sense of not being 'me' but 'this', now, an individuation of the event.

I was not the same from that morning, 10.30am on 3 February, 2004, at Berkeley Square, Bristol, the first day of the first unit of my doctoral degree, hearing Jane Speedy talk

about Foucault, Cixous, St. Pierre, Denzin, Deleuze, and others who have become my ancestors, elders and companions (see Gale and Wyatt, 2009) on an exhilarating journey of discovery.

Nor indeed the same since reading Camus when, in my final year as an undergraduate at York, and as I first began to welcome doubt, I had finally started to read. In my first two years, scheduled around my priorities of playing sport, my French Horn, and being active within the Christian Union, my study habit had been to head to the library, sit at a table with my books open and fall asleep. Camus shook me awake, though too late to make up for two-and-a-half years of evangelical, one-dimensional slumber and gain me a decent degree.

I kept a journal, a series of green exercise books, during those years of transition. Turning to writing in the hope of giving birth to myself (Barthes, 1989):

16 May 1981: The bible seems dull, steeped in laws and dogma, in extraordinarily elaborate theology which, to me, is so dry. The church even more so. This is frightening. Perhaps my faith has been more of a prop, a niche, where I know I am of value, than a living, vibrant love for what, or whom, I have called 'God'. Take away the label 'Jonathan Wyatt is a Christian' and I am lost. My present is based on the faith I share with the people who are my friends, my future around the security that I have a role to fulfil, somewhere, within Christian circles...I have missed, and am missing, in my relationships, the variety of vision and emotion that there is in people. I have been afraid of that, defensive about my own expansionist philosophy, seeking to have others take on that philosophy in the arrogance of claiming that mine is the truth.

Nor was I was the same after Victor Frankl.

Marc was my housemate and friend that final year. A few years older, in his hunger for learning as a police trainee he'd studied at night school to get the grades for university. Whilst I struggled to complete just my set books, he would stay up through the night reading Foucault and be alert enough in the morning to beat me at squash. It was Marc who pointed me towards Victor Frankl.

During the weeks after finishing my degree, the *assemblage* of Victor Frankl, Liverpool's raw streets, ravaged by the horrors of early Thatcherism, and my emergence from stupor, barked in still-deadened ears. I read *Man's Search for Meaning* whilst living and

working evenings in an inner-city Liverpool youth club I had made my temporary home. One entry in my journal marks my meeting with Frankl (2006), just with quoting him:

3 February 1982: Victor Frankl – ‘A lack of tension created by the loss of meaning is as dangerous a threat in terms of mental health as too high a tension.’ And, ‘Like iron filings in a magnetic field, man’s (sic.) life is put in order through his orientation toward meaning.’

No other comment. Only those two Frankl assertions. A legal clerk by day, a youth worker by evening; newly-politicised, full of regret at wasting my undergraduate studies, with an awakening of desire for learning, and in touch for the first time with my rage, Frankl stoked the fires. I learnt that meaning was not a given. There was no Absolute Truth.

Nor was I the same after Melanie Klein, Judith Butler, and Donald Winnicott; nor after group relations theory, nor a host of other writers, thinkers and experiences. My former evangelical faith became even more remote, meaningless, naïve and dull. Though I felt that it had not been a waste – I learned much that has remained of value – I regretted that I had invested so much in it.

I speak only for myself. Not all those who profess evangelical Christian faith would feel that their faith precluded engaging with ideas that seem to challenge their view of the world; nor do all evangelical Christians come to a point where they find their faith claustrophobic. For me, though, it was something I had to shed. I recently told colleagues that I once thought about training for the clergy but feel better now.

I feel better. Alive. Free. Hopeful.

And yet.

That is one version of the story. A progress narrative, one that casts learning as releasing me from the shackles of a narrow life and allowing me to skip into a better, more enriching future. I wish it were the only story. This narrative – of casting off an unhelpful, restricting, oppressive faith – is not the only one I could relate.

For example, I catch myself now, in 2012, whispering behind my back to a god who I believe cares for me, though I tell myself that s/he is projection.

And when Ken and I fell into conflict in finalising our recent writing, it seemed I was tossed back onto singular senses of the self. In writing and thinking with others over recent years, in valorising Deleuzian conceptualisations that reject the humanist subject, I find that, when the seas get rough, I hold onto ‘selves’ like limpets to rocks. When push comes to shove, I act as if I know that I am a modernist me, an individual in need of salvation.

And, most alarming, there was July. Tessa and I distant, a sense of looming upheaval, a crisis like no other we have had, she sat on our bed looking up at the photograph above her, of the two of us on our twentieth wedding anniversary, in the garden of our friend in Newcastle, kissing. Her tears started and so, in turn, did mine. We held each other in our grief, even as we faced plunging into an abyss.

At the foot of my abyss was not only loss, hurt, pain, guilt, regret and sadness.

As we teetered towards the edge, I glimpsed the prospect also of disappointing the god in whom I tell myself and others I no longer have faith; I had the sense of having erred from the Strait and Narrow; and I heard a voice within, somewhere deep inside, tell me that I would face Judgement. Hell. Part of the Jonathan-as-assemblage of that instant was convinced that I was pitching towards these though I tell myself I have no truck with them.

So, decades after growing away – or so I thought – from the evangelical Christian faith that had grounded my life (before and beyond death) since my early teens, my body, in its dread of that in which I do not believe, confronts me with the sense that I have – secretly, ambivalently – held onto elements of that faith. I do not want, it would seem, to surrender the hope of a Promised Land. The learning, the encounter with “threshold concepts” (Meyer and Land, 2005), portals to new worlds, has proved more than troublesome (Meyer and Land, 2005).

I saw Marc again, my friend and university housemate, this autumn, for the first time in two years, and told him stories of my recent troubles. He wondered to me, “What’s it like to be down here with the rest of us?”

Maybe, despite my profession of lost faith, I have maintained a fantasy of being ‘good’, as if I do not wish to burn all my fragile bridges to the god in whom I once believed. Were I to be standing in front of him, I could argue the case that my loss of faith is evidence of integrity but, should he not buy that, I could then play the card I have kept in my back pocket, just in case, that I have secretly kept believing in him anyway.

The narrative of progress and development I have been telling myself – that I have not just grown away but grown and grown up – is not tenable.

I doubt whether I doubt. I remain under the tyranny of absolutes, which still maintain an inexorable hold on me and which, apparently, I am unable to mourn the loss of. Perhaps I still love as well as hate my evangelical faith.

What follows in this paper does not concern theological argument; it is not an exegesis of biblical (un)truths, nor a psychological treatise on the perils of adolescent faith, but an examination of what it might mean when we talk about coming (or not) to embodied knowledge. It is an act of writing – writing, which Margaret Atwood describes as “a risky trip to the Underworld... to bring something or someone back from the dead” (2003, p. 140) – about the im/possibility of erasing that which is written, carved, onto the body (Winterson, ~~1993~~2001); it is about a fear that learning – however holistic, however much desired, however welcome – is impotent in the face of the “metanarrative stamped on [my] core” (Tamas, 2009, p. 49). Voices echo through the text, seeking to invoke the situated, provisional, nomadic ‘I’ (Braidotti, 2011) that feels so much at risk.

It’s dusk. Leaving St. Nicolas’ Church and its bells behind, I reach the Abbey Meadows, meeting the occasional shopper, mostly men, laden with last-minute Christmas gifts. I take a detour from my route home and head to the weir, stopping above it to listen to its thunder. Both up- and downstream, a matter of only a few feet either side, the water is steady. Above the maelstrom, I open my arms, clench my fists and roar. No one hears.

16 October 1982: What is so disturbing at the moment is that maybe my honesty and questioning with regard especially to my faith, and hence my restlessness, is something permanent. There may never be a ‘coming back’ to God, never a feeling of wanting to be involved with church life. There may not be God’s ‘plan’ for my future. I may never feel at peace...Is dissatisfaction the constant nagging reality of life? I either conform and silence the inner cries to be free or I heed the cries and thus live with the uneasiness and doubts in a world which I don’t feel I fit into.

A conversation I wish I could start, would go somewhere, and might help

Scene: a living room in the elder brother’s non-descript house in a non-descript English village. They sit, each in one of the two sofas that rests at right angles to each other. The grand piano at one end of the 10 metre room dominates. Classical music and religious

books rest on shelves. Jonathan takes a sip of tea. The two greying brothers talk, which they don't often do.

Jonathan: I lost my faith. I lost it many years ago. You know this. You were instrumental in my becoming a Christian – whatever that means – back when I was 13 and you were 18. You remember that too? And you were disappointed when I told you, twelve years later, that I was no longer a Christian, that I had stopped going to church. A few months later you refused to play the organ for our wedding. Do you remember that? Because we'd lived together; or because she and I were not Christians and had lived together? Were those the reasons? I'd moved on. I'd become something else. Perhaps it was because of the bamboo cane, which I never did tell you about. Not fully. I couldn't keep believing what I believed before. It no longer held. Do you understand? I never felt you did. You played at our wedding in the end. Now, just past 50, though I don't know whether it's *because* I'm 50, I worry, like I've secretly always done, however much I've tried not to, whether you've been 'right' all this time.

Silence.

(He is silent not because he is being unkind or is unable to respond. I find I can't put words into his mouth.)

How faith arrived, and what happened when doubt arrived some years later

What does it mean to 'lose faith'? When I tell myself that I have 'lost my faith', do I believe myself? It begs many questions. Erases. Does injustice. Lies.

There is a story of finding faith that begins like this:

I was 'born again' at 13. I invited Jesus into my life. At night, with my brother sitting on my bed talking with me, hearing his soft voice and watching his earnest face as he told me about the mystery. It made sense. It fit. We prayed. Something changed that night.

There. A neat beginning.

A more troubled beginning, the one that Jonathan- the-intermittent-but-long-term-therapy-client tells, is that, at 13 and on the threshold of adolescence, my anxiety at the prospect of relational, sexual and existential chaos led me to escape into a world of order, certainty, binaries and absolutes; right and wrong, heaven and hell, God and the Devil, Christian and non-Christian, the saved and the damned. It worked for a time, this psychological narrative goes, but – thankfully – was not successful as an avoidance strategy.

There are no neat ends, only swirling, looping narratives.

A significant incident, indicative that an ending of sorts had taken place, came when I was 25:

As my brother and I walked the heathland near home in leafy, comfortable Surrey, with our family's mongrel dog jumping the low winter bracken chasing elusive rabbits, I told him that Tessa was moving into my flat in Newcastle. As we walked, side by side, I turned my head to look at his face. I could see him draw in his cheeks, that familiar gesture of concern.

He spoke after a pause.

"What about sex before marriage? What about your commitment to the Lord? What about your faith, Jonathan?"

I expected this response, though had hoped for something different.

"I'm not going to church anymore." I replied, weary. "You know that. There are other ways of living a life. This feels fine. I'm happy."

From here, from this vantage point as a writer, half a lifetime later, I give my twenty-five-year-old self a round of applause for holding steady, though there's more I want him to say.

The struggles with my brother – with the internalised brother, that which he represented for me – were emblematic of the struggles with my faith.

25 March 1981: I feel that he and I have enormous barriers to overcome. I find it so difficult to talk to him about anything that genuinely means a lot to me. I seem to meet a brick wall when I, say, try to open up about Liz or Julie. As far as I can see, he finds it so difficult to open up in an honest, human way about himself as well. He is able to hide behind 'spirituality' so much of the time...Maybe his commitment to bible study and prayer is a way of escaping the vulnerability that comes from really talking about the other sides of his character. I showed him the entry of 26th January because I wanted him to see more of my heart.

He shows him the 26th January, 1981, green journal entry

I have my green journal open as I lie on my side on the hotel bed, legs aching pleasantly from the day on the slopes, when I'd worked hard on my suspect parallel turns. The bed is soft and my right elbow sinks too deep for me to write comfortably.

“What are you doing?”, he asks. He’s lying on his bed too, reading his red, well-thumbed New Jerusalem bible.

“I’m trying to write something, but I don’t know what. Not sure I can be bothered.”

He says nothing, eyes down.

“I’ve been writing this journal for a while,” I continue. “I write about God and about my faith. And the doubts I’m having and stuff. I’ve written recently about Julie quite a lot.”

Still not looking up, Simon says, “Uh-huh.”

Through the window by my bed, I can see, as if glowing in the dark, the slabs of snow on the sloping roof opposite illuminated by the street lights. They look as if they should slide onto the street below and I wonder what holds them in place.

I turn to him.

“Can I show you something I’ve written? Would you like to read it?”

He pauses. “Yes. OK,” and, looking up, takes the green notebook that I proffer.

“It’s the bit about Julie,” I explain. I turn to the window again as Simon reads. There is light snow falling. I try to fix my eyes on a single flake and follow its fall but it is impossible. I hear Simon sigh; I turn. He has placed the closed notebook on the bedside table between us.

“I wish I’d never read that,” and returns to his bible.

18 March 1983: Does being a Christian stultify that creative, searching spirit in people? I feel it’s doing that to me in my own small world.

15 May 1983: I don’t see any point in going to Newcastle (to train as a teacher). I have so little experience of the world, and I want to sort out my faith. When that is resolved (in 30 years’ time) I’ll think about careers.

25 December 1983: My main hang-ups at the moment? Sex, death and God. In that order.

Stories of the bamboo cane

It was over thirty years ago, when I was 19. Time distorts; tricks. It was before I started writing the green journal.

The man used a bamboo cane. It was pale, three feet long. He held it in one hand, the other loose at his hip.

The bamboo cane is not the reason for that Christmas conversation with my brother, not the cause of my lost faith, of the transition from the hope – and aridity – of a promised afterlife to the ruins and richness of what I now assume to be this single, messy stretch. The danger of the single story (Adichie, ~~2011~~2009) is that it flattens and simplifies. Yet, the stories of the bamboo cane, are ones that remain unexamined, that need to be re-written; and which remain etched into me. Indelible.

There is an earlier version (Gale and Wyatt, 2009) of these stories. Bronwyn Davies responded to my/our treatment of them:

“Somehow in the post discussion of these beatings, the brutality seemed to become unproblematically linked to spirituality, and the spirituality the thing that needed to be affirmed. I couldn’t go along with that link. Desire for spirituality, even a problematic linking in the mind of the young J, yes, perhaps, but not now, in retrospect to be seen as a straightforward linking. The sexual pleasure and perversion of the one doing the beating can’t be removed from the equation. This troubled me a lot in the reading of it. Too much affirmation and not enough serious challenging to the abuse.” (Wyatt et al., 2011, p.75)

The way in which I have told these stories in the past is that they happened but did not leave a mark.

He used a bamboo cane. I remember its sound. How it cut the air before it cut me, slicing the soft skin offered as I bent over the wooden chair.

A satisfying swipe, accelerating, urgent. A triumph of displaced air.

I gripped the sides of the seat in anticipation of each strike.

The cane that cut me made me bleed, split the membranes that held me together, violated my skin, my close-held sense of self, the self that, unlike St. Pierre (2011), I find I hold onto, despite everything, for both writing and living:

“I have not yet learned to write easily without saying ‘I’, ‘me’, ‘myself’, ‘one’, ‘oneself’, though I do not need them so much anymore for living.” (p. 619)

Maybe I sought out the cane in misplaced hope of creating flow, to break myself open. So that not everything would be already cut and dried.

Neither of us counted aloud. I trusted him to count. (I trusted him.) He would pause after ten or twenty and tell me how many were left. He would draw close whilst I remained in position; he would lean over, a tender hand on my back, his mouth at my ear.

“That’s fifty, Jonathan. You’re doing so well. Know that you are doing this for Him. He is proud of you. He loves you.”

I heard the cane but never saw it slice through space, making space, only as it rested against the wall when, before we began, we would talk, pray and read from Scripture. I heard the cane but my eyes were closed and I faced away both from it and him.

I was not the only one. I knew of others. I learnt years later I had been part of a ‘club’, as it was termed, of more than twenty. All young men. Eager, earnest, striving to be the best for Him; they – we – shared this secret: that when we each committed the ‘sin’ of masturbation he would call the man and arrange to go to his house for a beating. I got beaten for beating off.

“Others wouldn’t understand,” he would tell me. “They don’t need to know. It’s not because it’s wrong. Scripture is clear that such disciplining, when applied with love, is helpful. We need it sometimes, particularly over matters of the flesh. But if they knew they would destroy what we’re trying to do. They would be misguided, of course, but it would be understandable. Best not to say.”

So, as an eager, earnest young man, striving to be the best for Him, I stayed silent over the months of this episode, and have mostly since. We all stayed silent. I stayed silent to my housemates at university. They knew I had a ‘spiritual mentor’, but knew nothing of why I travelled south to see him every so often.

I stayed silent to my closest friend, Andrew. He and I would play football, go running (and do other straight, manly activities), meet for coffee, talk about our faith, our relationships (such as they were, in my case: I was ‘waiting for the right girl’), go to Christian Union meetings and church together with our friends. I said nothing about the beatings.

I stayed silent to my sister. I stayed silent to my brother. They would have been horrified.

I stayed silent to my parents. Once, on a journey to a beating, my connecting train from London was diverted to Guildford. Home. The train sat at the platform for 30 minutes. I could have got off; I could have found a call box and said, “Surprise! I’m at Guildford station. Come and get me.” (Come and rescue me. From this madness. From myself. Please.) Instead, I stayed at my seat on the train, destined for Winchester and his house, his wife and small children, and the shed in his orchard to which we would head that evening.

What was it that held me immobile in my train seat? I called it faith at the time. Loyalty to my then god. I called it courage. Perseverance. Willingness to put Him first. And fear: I

was afraid of what not ‘going through’ with this would mean. The guilt. The terror of judgement.

Talking last summer, 2011, with my friend from back then, the only member of the club I was close to and with whom I remain in touch, we stood at a pub in his village with our partners, talking about this time. It was the evening after his 50th birthday celebrations. We said that, sometime, we want to get together for a weekend with other members of the club to talk about it all. No longer of the same – any – faith, his explanation of our passivity during that time concerns sado-masochism, a process whereby we relieved ourselves of the burden of guilt and thereby gained what might loosely be described as ‘pleasure’.

Back in therapy (and wishing I didn’t need to go)

September, 2011. I am back in my therapist’s basement room, years since I thought I was done with therapy; or done with my own therapy, at least. Others come to me for theirs, but I have had to switch chairs to try to face where I am in my life and what I want.

“You only have one life,” he challenges me. “Unless you’re a Buddhist or something. In thirty years will this be what you want?”

Just the one life then. No heaven, no hell. Do I believe that?

12 April 1984: I still pray. Well, it’s only a token gesture, like occasionally reading the bible. I still go to church too but rarely feel that I have put very much in or got very much out. And I worry that in reality I am just hanging on to old lifelines that, if I was a man of integrity, I would let go of.

8 July 1985: I wonder about my faith and what it’s rooted in now, if at all. Yes, I have faith but I feel that it runs deeper than church worship, bible-reading and prayer, which seem so bound up with traditional ways of ‘how to do it’. I still feel free not to go to church, more alive, more me.

Where the bamboo cane lived

The house was at the edge of a village. White stoned, with wooden external beams. We would turn left off the narrow road into the drive. I would greet his wife as we entered the

house, a kiss to the cheek to welcome me. She would make a pot of tea. Their small children, two of them, a boy and a girl, would treat me like a favoured, cool uncle.

The path led from the back door direct from the house through a garden, flower beds and lawn on either side, over uneven paving slabs into a modest orchard. As the path curved to the right, I could see the handful of plum and apple trees, and their promise of fruit. The wooden shed had a door that opened outwards. He would unlock it with a key he carried in his hand and I would walk in first. The room would be warm; in his care for me, he would have lit the gas fire earlier, for comfort. There was a bed in the corner, draped in a faded red and black check blanket; and a pillow. This is where I would rest, in between sets of fifty or seventy-five; and at the end, when it was all over. He would hold me, kneeling by the side of the bed, one hand on my left shoulder, the other stretched across my back to rest on my right. His head would lie on me and he would reassure, soothe, comfort. God's love, God's pleasure, God's pride. How brave. How strong. How loyal. I would breathe into the pillow, a head dismembered from the bloodied weals on my buttocks.

The first time, I was expecting ten strikes, maybe twenty. I had not been afraid. I had been beaten before at school and it had been swift and clean, a shoe on trousers. He explained, as I took in for the first time the shed and its musty warmth, that there needed to be enough of a deterrent. There was no point in its being desultory. He suggested sixty-five.

As a deterrent, it was not effective. The following occasions, the number increased, driven by an inexorable, unarguable logic.

23 May 1984: My faith is based on fear. And guilt.

Enough: two final visits to the orchard

These are the most difficult stories to tell differently. I re-read how I have told them before (Gale and Wyatt, 2009) and it is the emotional distance that impresses itself. It is as if the narrator was telling it of someone else. The bare sequence of events is there; perhaps also the glimpse, through binoculars, of their awfulness and of the summoned strength and clarity. The 'I' at the time of writing, the storyteller, seemed to be seeking spare, matter-of-fact, self-effacing prose to play down the profound terror and the monumental achievement that followed it of telling my abuser to go fuck himself.

A Friday evening in May, 1980, several months after it all began

On a late Spring night, in the front room of my shared house on Blakeney Place in York, aged 19, in a battered old arm chair, I look out through open curtains onto the concrete path, the patch of grass and the quiet street beyond, a red receiver to my ear.

“It’s Jonathan. I need to come down, I’m afraid. I’ve let Him down again.”

Pause. A sigh of sadness.

“Oh, Jonathan. I’m sorry. He will be proud of you that you are facing up to it though. When were you thinking?”

“Maybe next weekend? A week today?”

“Yes, that will be fine. Just let me know what train. I’ll be there. Be strong.”

That weekend

I read the Bible each morning as normal. I pray. I meet with friends, go to church, raise my hands in worship. I am sure that no one else in the throng of the faithful alongside me is facing such an ordeal. I am frightened about next weekend but I am also full of my encounters, alone and with others, with a God who is loving and forgiving and I wonder – for the first time – whether this ‘club’ is compatible with such a relationship.

As I dink the squash ball into the nick but fail to deceive my opponent, I decide that God does not need me to go through with it this time. He knows that I am repentant and He has already forgiven me. I feel the surge of joy this brings.

However, there is a voice (a Voice?) that asks whether I might be deceiving myself, am being weak, am doing this only in order to make life easier. The way of the Lord is hard, this voice says.

The Monday evening after that weekend

“I’ve been thinking and praying all weekend. I believe God does not need me to travel to you on Friday.”

He pushes me, questioning my reasons. I insist:

“I’m sure. I know I’ve learned. He knows my resolve to be the best for Him. I believe He is not asking me to go through with this.”

Monday night, Tuesday, Tuesday night, Wednesday

My sleep is fitful. Over two days and two nights, the voice that told me I was weak and self-deceiving becomes amplified. It tells me that it was Satan to whom I had been listening in making the decision not to travel to the orchard. I have disobeyed God and I will find no peace until I have put the matter right.

On the Tuesday evening I attend a concert with friends at the Sir Jack Lyons concert hall by the resident Fitzwilliam String Quartet and the ageing oboe virtuoso Leon Goossens. Goossens, in his early 80s, is poor. My friends are engrossed, the audience forgiving in the presence of the great man. At one point he stops, mid-phrase. The members of the quartet pause until he has recovered; the audience pays patient respect. He picks up the beginning of the passage with a flourish and the audience exhales. I can't bear it, can't handle his hesitancy and frailty, feel intolerant of the calm, attentive etiquette of the classical music crowd; and I can't stand still and chat during the interval. As the concert drags to a close I want to grab my friend's hand in the darkened auditorium, lift it to my cheek and whisper "Help me" in her ear. As the applause begins and all stand to acclaim their last experience of a spent force, I force my way along the rows and run home in the rain.

On Wednesday, I play football. I am hopeless. Half-hearted, hesitant, disengaged. I know by now that this turmoil will not end until I make the call. I know it as I line up on the pitch, as the ball rolls at pace towards me in the first minute, as I attempt to set the terror to one side, for just 90 minutes. I can't, and my control is poor and my subsequent pass fails to reach a teammate.

The word I have come to live over these two days and nights, the word that I carry in my legs as I mistime a sliding tackle, the word that seeps from my pores as sweat, that I am unable to expel from my lungs as I spit, is dread. Growing, poisonous dread. Not of making the trip south to the orchard but of the consequences of not doing so.

We lose.

Wednesday evening

I make the call.

The following Sunday

The long train journey home from Winchester, though my soreness means I have to stand, is like the beginning of a new life. I am at peace with Him, at peace with myself.

A month later, June, 1980, one Saturday evening

We are sitting, side by side, in the orchard. I am due another beating. This time, I did not try to duck out, but I did tell him over the phone that I was continuing to have doubts about this process.

Now that I am here, I know. I see the bamboo cane rest against the wooden strut under the window of the shed. I know that he will not use it on me today.

He is not angry, but he is sad and disappointed in me. I am saying that this is no longer for me. It can't be right, I tell him. I have been reading a book with the title *Christianity with a Human Face* (Macaulay and Barrs, 1979) and I am inspired by its complex, theorised message of compassion. Something, somehow, over the weeks since last time, has made me more able to hold onto the God of these two authors, and the God of those whom I love and respect in York, the God I encounter day by day, not the God of this shed. I will not do this anymore. I know this. I did not tell him over the phone; I have made the trip to tell him, face to face, on the bed on which I – and however many other young men there now are – recover in his arms.

I spend the evening with his family. He is distant but not unfriendly.

On the train back to York next day, I am at peace with Him and at peace with myself. I sit.

Another conversation I wish I could have

Scene: *it's the kitchen in the house by the orchard. Jonathan is walking around the room, taking it in, disorientated. He pauses by the sink to look through the window onto the flower bed, the lawn, the paving slabs, and the path towards the fruit trees.*

Behind him, he hears the soft opening and closing of a door. He turns. There's a woman at the table, her back to him. She's in her 70s now. He knows who she is. He sits too, and looks at her. Her face is turned towards his, but she shows no recognition.

He opens his mouth to speak, then stops. Silence. A second attempt. He finds a halting voice.

Jonathan: You made me tea.

Pause.

Jonathan: Milk, no sugar. And a biscuit. When I finished, you called, “Cheerio,” as we opened the back door. As if we were taking a stroll to the shop.

Pause.

Jonathan: I’ve always wanted to ask you about the tea.

Pause. He sighs and looks again through the window. He catches a reflection of her collecting herself to leave.

Jonathan: Don’t go yet. Stay awhile.

Sunday, New Year’s Day 2012, Abingdon

23 August 1984: I think I look for ‘romance’ and ‘poetry’ in every situation...Or is it intensity that I hunger for? What could I do if I had no fear?

In the first section of this paper, Christmas Eve, I proposed that I was writing in order to explore the extent to which learning, however powerful an experience, is less so than I’d hoped; how, in the face of an existential, emotional, moral, crisis, I had to face the recognition that, like Brighton rock, the fundamentalist evangelical beliefs of my youth remain visible throughout the centre of the essentialist ‘me’ whose existence I fall back on, despite myself. “Even those we repudiate haunt us as structuring, lingering absences” (Tamas, 2009, p. 55).

Tonight, I look down the gentle slope of the year ahead, after a good week’s writing folded in amongst the family reunions, the gatherings of neighbours and friends, the customary mid-winter minor illnesses, and the other rituals of a secular, middle-class Western Christmas, and find an optimism I did not expect.

It could be argued that these stories of the bamboo cane amount to a narrative of trauma and abuse. To an extent this is a narrative I choose to own. I never have till now. I recognise the symptoms – the epistemic crisis (Tamas, 2009), for one. Has the bamboo cane made me unable to believe anything other than in the vengeful god of that period in my life, left its

ineradicable mark so that all other beliefs are so much decoration, clothes I remove when I reach the privacy of home? And the ‘victim’ behaviour is another indication. As I have been writing through this Christmas period, I have been drawn to search for where the man who wielded the cane, and that power, and whom I allowed to do so, now is. I find him. I read objectionable articles he has written, sermons he has given; I read about his long, stable marriage and his grown-up children and multiple grand-children. I find the personal website that speaks of an unimpeachable record as a fine, well-regarded man, a story which I find I can believe. He was misguided, yes, I tell myself, but not out to do harm. I am the victim of abuse who continues to defend the abuser.

It is inevitable the bamboo cane would leave such marks. I understand this.

I wonder how different the stories of my losing faith would have been had this episode not happened. After holding such deep convictions – note the depth/surface metaphors of self that are so difficult to shift – at a formative stage of life, is it not likely (I ask myself) that I would still, now, be wishing to hold that conversation with my brother and wondering, secretly, with concern, whether I had not ditched beliefs that were True and that all this poststructural theorising was so much nonsense? The proposition that I create my own god, and that I am constructed, that I perform myself and am not essential, given, known before I was born – is knowledge that offers to inscribe my body. But it’s too late. The marks of my faith – the Marks of Cane – are already etched into me.

I am minded to think that I might still have been doubting my doubt, though maybe my questioning of my faith in my early twenties and my subsequent embracing of and leaping with new ways of living my life would have been less fearful. (“What could I do if I had no fear?”)

Pitt and Britzman, writing about the difficulties of learning, propose that trauma is a “metaphor for the pushes and pulls between knowing and being known, between phantasy and reality, between one’s early history and one’s haunted present of learning.” (Pitt and Britzman, 2003, pp. 769-70). The bamboo cane symbolises and reinforces, it would seem, the permanence of my archaic views of the world and the consequent impossibility of embodied learning.

And yet.

I wrote then. I turned to writing those green journals between 1980 and 1985, through the shifting plates of my faith. I started writing the month after the last visit to the orchard. I hadn't read about writing as inquiry or writing as therapy. No one told me to write. I just wrote.

I'm writing now. If faith concerns what we do, what we turn to, what we lean on, then maybe it's writing I believe in, not the 'Him' I fear. It's writing that offers the possibility of passionate intensity, an immersion in something larger/other than myself, what Deleuze would call Being (Deleuze, 1994), which I once sought in evangelical Christianity (Bronwyn Davies, personal communication).

Maybe if I keep writing – doomed, impossible, fickle, dangerous, transitory writing – over and around the indelible, a different text will become visible.

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¹ A 'Christingle' is a symbolic object used in children's services in the lead-up to Christmas. A Christingle is: an orange (which represents the world), around which is a red ribbon (the blood of Christ); sweets (or perhaps dried fruit) pinned into the orange (the fruitfulness of the earth); and a candle inserted into the centre of the orange (Christ as the light of the world).

² *Fairytale of New York*, The Pogues